

What is in the best interest of a child? My name is Larry Herren and as a Clinical Social Worker specializing in Adolescent and Family therapy, I have known for many years that it is not in the best interest of children to experience drastic reductions in time with an otherwise willing and healthy parent.

I'm testifying in support of HB5267 because it speaks directly to the need, and the rights, of children to have the involvement and influence of both parents in their lives after the trauma of divorce. Frequent and consistent access to a parent is critical to establishing and maintaining a healthy parent child relationship. This fact is supported by research and is overwhelmingly the majority of opinion in the Mental Health community.

Dr. Michael Willett is a PH.D. Developmental Psychologist. His expertise and extensive work in "high conflict" divorce cases is widely known and respected by the Family Court system of our state. Dr. Willett notes that one of the many consequential effects to having an under-involved parent is all of the various gender issues and implications that result. More specifically, children learn through modeling from both parents to effectively establish their own ego strengths, personality traits and perceptions. Dr. Willett also notes that having both parents equally involved empowers a child by providing them additional resources to deal with life. But when a parent's role is disenfranchised and reduced to an every other weekend visitor, they are significantly minimized as a real authority figure or a viable resource. And additionally, so is any extended family that may have otherwise been in place and helpful to a child's life experiences.

As a long time LMSW Family Therapist Ken Mazur concluded, children define the legitimacy of a parental role through meaningful and consistent interaction. Not just as an every other weekend playmate but as someone who participates in all elements of parenting such as attending to emotional and physical needs and providing ongoing structure and guidance. Joint physical custody, in-fact, provides this opportunity for shared parenting. Additionally, it allows men to prove that they can be nurturing and woman to show that they are able to take charge. And children then learn how to be both rather than a cultural script of gender stereotyping that has limited us, and to some extent, damaged us as people for generations.

Licensed Marital and Family therapist Karen Copeland lends further credence to the notion that children need the consistent involvement of both parents in their lives for the effective integration of a cohesive sense of self. She clarifies that when children are not allowed to experience both parental domains, it leaves a serious potential for them to compartmentalize their relationships with their parents. It also has significant potential for creating emotional voids in children which statistics increasingly show are being demonstrated in various and alarming ways.

In closing, HB5267 would require all parties involved to start from a position that truly prioritizes what a child needs. The current system fails in doing this and is easily manipulated to what amounts to a "tug of war" in which the children are a trophy and the process is a "winner takes all" but in the end, although one parent might win, it is the children who lose.